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SUBJECT: COMANDO MAISANTA: A MID-CAMPAIGN UPDATE

Classified By: ACTING DCM ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR REASONS 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (U) Since its formation, President Hugo Chavez's anti-recall referendum campaign committee, Comando Maisanta, has balanced its activities between concentrated lobbying and widespread propaganda dissemination. Comando Maisanta has pushed for redistributing voting centers and purifying the electoral registry in their meetings with the National Electoral Council (CNE). Finalizing the formation of citizen electoral patrols has most recently been a central component of the campaign, with President Chavez traveling around Venezuela to induct the members personally. End Summary.

REDISTRIBUTION AND PURIFICATION

2. (U) President Chavez's Comando Maisanta, the campaign committee established to win the recall referendum, has continuously called for the redistribution of and an increase in the number of voting centers around Venezuela. On June 22, Maripili Hernandez, national director of events and image for Comando Maisanta, publicly asserted that there is a profound disequilibrium in the distribution of voting centers that negatively affects the poorer, more populous areas. Despite a July 13 decision by the CNE to not add 1000 additional voting centers in poorer neighborhoods, the issue continues to resurface. During their July 16 meeting with members of the CNE, Minister of Information and Communication Jesse Chacon and Samuel Moncada, a member of the Comando Maisanta brain-trust, once again called for an increase in the number of voting centers.

3. (U) In his July 16 meeting with the CNE, Moncada also questioned the purity, transparency and trustworthiness of the national electoral registry. He claimed that although the CNE removed 160,000 deceased persons from the registry, a significant, but unnamed, quantity of the dead still needed to be removed. Moncada also contended that more than 5,000 Venezuelans living abroad had effectively renounced their citizenship and should also be removed from the registry.

ELECTORAL PATROLS

4. (U) To reach into the communities, Comando Maisanta has established electoral patrols. These groups of ten individuals are a central component of the President's anti-recall campaign. President Chavez has conducted rallies in major metropolitan areas across Venezuela to induct members personally. Patrol members are responsible for mobilizing voters for the August 15 referendum and organizing local-level events in support of Chavez. Comando Maisanta hopes to establish 130,000 patrols with a total 1.3 million members; the ideal number, they say, needed to manage 13 million voters. On July 14, Fifth Republican Movement (MVR) deputy and national director of organization for Comando Maisanta, William Lara claimed that only 100,000 patrols had been established. He further admitted that all of the existing patrols were not completely efficient and that Comando Maisanta would be conducting an audit of the patrols to evaluate their performance.

PROPAGANDA AND SMEAR TACTICS

5. (U) Comando Maisanta's campaign strategy is focused on maintaining a steady flow of electoral propaganda. Members of the patrols hand out leaflets that claim Venezuelan sovereignty is under attack by the United States and also tout the successes of Chavez's presidency, focusing specifically on PDVSA, the social missions and improvements to the health system. Additionally, Chavez supporters have

hung large "Vote No" signs every 15 feet in the median of the

central highway in Caracas. The blanket coverage of "Vote No" signs took place the day after the National Guard prevented pro-opposition activists from placing their propaganda in the very same locations.

16. (U) The Comando Maisanta has also used unfounded allegations to discredit and defame the opposition. During a July 4 public address on Margarita Island, William Lara accused the opposition of formulating a plot to sabotage the voting machines that will be used for the August 15 referendum. In the July 11 episode of "Alo Presidente", President Chavez asserted that the National Endowment for Democracy funded the Coordinadora Democratica's "Plan Consenso Pais" (National Consensus Plan). On July 13, Samuel Moncada publicly stated that the font and color scheme used by the opposition for its "Si" propaganda are identical to the format used by the United Self-Defense Forces (AUC) in Colombia, and therefore was evidence of links between the two groups.

COMMENT

17. (C) As the date of the referendum approaches, the campaign is picking up momentum and will continue to intensify. Members of Comando Maisanta have latched on to a number of key issues, which they believe will help determine the outcome. The issue of "insufficient" numbers of voting centers in poorer neighborhoods, in concert with complications that may arise from the voting and fingerprint machines, potentially provides Chavez and Comando Maisanta with ammunition should they choose to contest the results of the referendum if the results are in favor of the opposition.

For now, the issue has been sidelined as the National Electoral Council contemplates the addition of voting machines at established centers instead of opening new ones. That said, however, it does not mean that the Comando Maisanta has abandoned it. As for the electoral patrols, where they operate, they appear to be effective. The test for Comando Maisanta will be how many they eventually constitute and the breadth of their coverage across the nation.

McFarland

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